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## THE PEOPLE, THE LEGISLATURE, AND THE SCHOOLS

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### III. SOME NEEDED REFORMS IN OUR EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION

**I**N the January number of the JOURNAL I undertook to point out how an iniquitous taxing system has been a barrier to progress in all lines of public endeavor in North Carolina—especially in public education. I tried also to make clear the opportunity and the need for constructive, progressive school legislation at this session of the General Assembly, and the desire of the people for such legislation, as shown by the overwhelming vote they gave for the constitutional amendment in November.

In this article I wish to discuss some needed reforms in the organization and administration of our public school affairs. In this discussion I shall proceed on the hypothesis that the present Legislature will give us, in so far as it can under the constitution, an equitable taxing system; but if it should not do so, that fact will in nowise invalidate the arguments for the reforms advocated.

#### SOME NEEDED REFORMS

Some of the reforms in our school organization and administration that ought to be effected as early as possible are:

1. The consolidation of the public school work into one state system with each county as an administrative unit.
2. The reorganization of our school work on the 6-3-3-plan, instead of the 7-4 plan which we now have.
3. Our machinery of administration should be simplified.
4. State supervision of the planning, construction, and equipment of all public school buildings. A competent school architect should be employed by the State and be given general supervision of these important matters.
5. There should be both a state and a county building fund, separate and apart from the maintenance fund. This is necessary in order to do two things: (1) to guarantee that all public school buildings shall be designed and constructed in accordance with modern principles of school architecture; and (2) to protect teachers' salaries, by preventing communities from paying for their buildings out of their maintenance fund.
6. State auditing of all school accounts.

This list of needed improvements is by no means

complete. Yet, if these six things were done, many of the problems we spend a great deal of time in discussing would solve themselves. I shall not be able to discuss these topics in detail in this paper. I will call attention in passing to some of the improvements that would follow if the plan proposed in the first section were put into effect. Instead of having two or more distinct groups of schools and school interests, as we have at present (city and county), with a county superintendent for the rural schools of each county and as many so-called "city superintendents" as there are "places" having special school charters, all the schools, city and rural, of each county should be placed under one competent, professionally trained administrative head who should have such professional and clerical assistance as might be necessary. Such consolidation would lead to many reforms and to greater economy and efficiency all along the line. In the first place, the plan would make it possible to put at the head of the schools of practically every county a capable, professionally trained, experienced superintendent of schools charged with the professional oversight and supervision of all the county's educational interests\*.

This plan would eliminate unnecessary duplication and consequent waste; it would prevent working at cross-purposes, and it would provide harmony and co-operation in many places where they are now lacking; it would encourage consolidation of local districts and transportation of pupils; it would simplify bookkeeping and reporting, since there would be just 100 officials to report to the State Department of Education, instead of 572 (100 county superintendents, 125 city superintendents, and 257 public high school principals); it would simplify the auditing of school accounts and make our school statistics possible of intelligent interpretation; it would enable us to conduct our school business in a more business-like way; it would promote efficiency and economy in ways too numerous to mention here.

Don't misunderstand me. I do say that under such a plan there should be dead uniformity—for the state or even the county—in courses of instruction, text-

\* Such a plan is already in successful operation in the counties of Wilson and Richmond, to the extent that one superintendent in each of these counties has general supervision of both county and city schools; but beyond that, no plan of complete consolidation is in effect. New Hanover has consolidation of school interests into one system for the county, including the city of Wilmington, but two superintendents, one for the country schools and one for the city schools.

books, methods, etc. I am advocating nothing of the kind. Nor am I suggesting that the city schools or special local tax districts in the county have any of the privileges withdrawn that they now enjoy. As a matter of fact, I am sure that under the plan proposed both city and rural schools could and should be given greater latitude in many of these matters than they now have. But this is aside from the point. What I am suggesting is a plan whereby all our schools can be more efficiently and more economically administered than will ever be possible under our present organization. Our present plan is one of disintegration; the plan I am proposing is one of solidification.

#### PUBLIC EDUCATION A STATE FUNCTION

Now, let me say, *the administration of our public schools is a state, and not a local, function.* This should be the point of departure for all our discussions of public education. It is universally accepted in all legal procedure regarding educational affairs, and is so well known by all students of education, that it ought not to be necessary to call attention to it here. Yet, in North Carolina, there seem to be so many who fail to understand this one fundamental fact—judging from some recent discussions of local autonomy, and criticisms on the centralization of authority—that I call attention to it and illustrate it for the sake of emphasis.

For example, the public schools of the city of Asheville are in operation primarily and fundamentally *as a part of the public school system of North Carolina*, and not simply as a separate and independent system of schools; they are in operation because of North Carolina's constitutional guarantee which lays upon the city of Asheville the obligation of maintaining public schools, and not simply by virtue of any local autonomy or any local authority granted to the city of Asheville by the Constitution or by the General Assembly of North Carolina. Suppose the city of Asheville should decide that it would abolish public schools altogether; could it do it? By no means—no more than it could declare that murder—a crime against the State—is not a crime in Asheville. To be sure, the State confers upon the city of Asheville certain powers and grants it certain authority in the administration of its school affairs; and, too, the city levies for its public schools voluntarily a much larger tax than is necessary to meet simply the constitutional requirement—its intelligence, its patriotism, its civic pride, dictate that it should do so. But this fact by no means changes the administration of the city's school affairs from a state to a local function. This point is too frequently overlooked or misunderstood; and though

this misunderstanding may be due in large measure to the very fact that Asheville's willingness and ability have enabled it to operate its schools on a higher level and for a longer term than the State can require of all its schools, it does not alter the primary fact that *the operation and administration of its public school system is a state function.*

#### THE STATE'S GUARANTEE OF SCHOOL FACILITIES

Now, the first obligation resting upon the Legislature is to provide the ways and means for making effective the *State's guarantee* of a school term of six months in every district in North Carolina. It must provide the machinery for carrying out this guarantee and make provision for getting the revenue with which to do it, regardless of what the "bill of particulars" may be. To make it effective, the State must set up and maintain certain minimum standards—standards of work, of teaching proficiency, of opportunity. Can these matters be left to local agencies with any assurance that the State's standards will be maintained everywhere and its guarantee made effective for every child? The answer, in the light of the State's experience, is emphatically "No." Then, a considerable part of the revenue that the State requires for the operation of its schools must of necessity be held under control by the State, which means that a considerable part of it will have to be collected by the State and be distributed from the State treasury—but not as a "grab-fund," not administered in a way to reward the indifferent, nor yet in such manner as to rob any county or district of its initiative or integrity. Quite the reverse. First, it must of course be administered justly, and be so distributed as to carry out the State's guarantee and at the same time so as to enable the State to establish and to maintain good minimum standards of work everywhere. This can be done and it must be done. It can be done without working any undue hardship on the weaker counties or laying any unjust burden upon the stronger ones. It can be done without taking away local autonomy or initiative and without the loss of local self-respect and integrity. But the problem of making effective the State's guarantee must be attacked and solved, not as 100 or 225 local problems in as many different ways, but primarily as *one state problem.*

#### HOW TO DO IT

The surest and most certain way to do it is for the State to get what revenue it can as a state school fund (under our constitutional limitation of 66 2-3 cents on the \$100 of property valuation) to be used for certain specific purposes, and with the major portion of it

run all the schools for as long a term as possible, and then require all counties (except a few that would have to be aided from a part of the State fund to be set aside as an equalizing fund) to levy a special tax sufficient to finish out a term of six months in every district. A limit of taxation would necessarily have to be established up to which every county would be required to levy before getting aid from the equalizing fund. (If property assessments are equalized, not a large number of counties will draw from the equalizing fund, and so this fund, although a very necessary one, will not have to be large.) A part of the State's fund, too should be set apart for buildings and equipment, another part to stimulate and to encourage progressive school practices along lines that backward communities would not likely undertake on their own initiative. The state fund might be sufficient to run all schools for three months (as proposed in the Joyner bill) or it might be sufficient to run them only two or two and one-half months. But this point, while important, is not a pertinent one for the purpose of this discussion. The state fund must be large enough really to count—to enable the State to direct, to supervise, to encourage, to stimulate—in short, to make really effective the State's guarantee. There are many other details that ought to be discussed in this connection—such as expert supervision, health instruction, medical inspection, teacher-training, vocational education, a stronger system of high schools, teachers' homes, consolidation and transportation, the reorganization of our school work on the 6-3-3-plan, a broader curriculum, the text-book problem, etc.—but these must be omitted for the present.

#### THE PROBLEM FROM ANOTHER ANGLE

Look for a moment at the problem from another angle to see whether or not, from the point of view of the Nation as well as that of the State, matters of fundamental importance to our common welfare can be safely left to haphazard, willy-nilly, *laissez faire*, local initiative and willingness. Look at just two of the aspects of the problem of public education—illiteracy and physical unfitness—as revealed by the selective draft. The Nation was astounded to find that practically half of its young men, in the prime of life, were physically unfit for military service! And we were humiliated to find so large a per cent of them who could not read and write! *Twenty-eight per cent of those called in North Carolina were physically unfit, and twenty-four per cent were illiterate!* This is what local autonomy—democracy gone to seed—leads to. One can't say in print what one really feels about it: one must exercise considerable restraint by

calling it simply a shameful disgrace. Shall we profit by this experience or not? Can the State with impunity longer leave matters of such momentous public concern as the promotion of health education and the absolute prevention of illiteracy to local initiative and chance willingness, to say nothing of numerous other aspects of the general problem of public education? The State must step in with determination to wipe out such a disgrace and to prevent its recurrence forevermore, or the National Government will be forced to do it in the interest of national welfare. To the winds with your local self-government so long as it shows such a lack of intelligence, or remains so short-sighted, as to permit such things to happen! To say, "Oh well, the schools are responsible for this situation—here's where they have failed," is to state only a half-truth at most, and to side-step the responsibility. It does not help the situation. Where does the responsibility lie? The National Government *wisely* left the matter of public education to the several states, and the states in too many instances neglected certain aspects of this function by *unwisely* turning over too large a share of the responsibility to local willingness and local means, trusting to local initiative and local interest, which too often regards itself as having nothing in common with the State's interest or with national interest. If the State fails now at this critical time to take a firm hold of the problem of public education in its varied aspects, because a few communities are unwilling to give their support to an effective, comprehensive program of education, on the ground that it will cost them a few dollars more to carry it out, and because a few citizens are willing to delay action while they talk glibly of "democracy" and "local self-government," it will simply permit such communities and such statesmen to damn another generation of its citizens.

#### OUR PROFESSION (?)

OUT of 600,000 teachers in the U. S., one-half have had no special training for their work; 300,000 are not more than twenty-five years of age. Something like 50 per cent have had no education beyond the high school or its equivalent; 30,000 have had no "schooling" beyond the last year in the elementary school. Not over one in four serves in the profession for more than five years! In reverence we say it. God save the United States of America!—L. A. W.

The natural impulse of every citizen in America is to respect every other citizen, and to feel that citizenship constitutes a certain ground of respect.—J. BRYCE.